

# Essay on david lynch's blue velvet

Experience, Human Nature



Over history, literature has impacted the approach and understanding of multimedia, pop entertainment. Furthermore, it has shaped our social ideologies, contesting current norms, and furthering our own examination of societal approaches and schools of thought. Much of the narrative and film techniques have incorporated a psychological and psychoanalytic examination of human nature and how it impacts everyday life. David Lynch's film, Blue Velvet is one of the most influential films, pushing the world of entertainment into new perspectives, reshaping much of the technique producers undertake.

Blue Velvet served as a major catalyst for independent filmmaking, which largely reshaped multimedia entertainment. Throughout this film, Lynch heavily relies on Freudian theories, specifically revolving about the Oedipal complex/conflict, sadism, masochism, and fetishism as a connecting point between the characters. Throughout this paper, I apply these Freudian techniques on the psychoanalytic level by examining and analyzing various characters. This will further illustrate how Blue Velvet as well as other works that are heavily based on psychology, impact our society.

Lynch's film was particularly influential because of his incorporation of darker topics, as well as the connection between his film and Franz Kafka's work in terms of grotesque themes. Lynch helped to shape literature as well, during the tone of this period of darker themes in creative works, because authors began to incorporate darker themes in their own work. The Gothic is a particular genre that Blue Velvet helped to shape. Not only did the film address psychological levels and theories that had yet to be fully represented in pop-media film, but it also utilized a popular Freudian theory

called the uncanny. Lynch achieves this because, throughout the film, people are often unable to describe what they've seen.

Lynch focuses on the opening setting of Blue Velvet in a small town, encapsulating an idealistic All-American image. The audience is given a picture-perfect neighborhood where children cross the street with the help of a crossing guard in uniform, surrounded by a scene of blue skies, white picket fences, and colorful tulips in blossom. These images force viewers to think about how we collectively define the American Dream, as well as what the "perfect life" is. By doing so, Lynch is able to tap into our psyche; this storybook beginning allows him to go deeper, behind the fences and smiling children, into a world of anything but perfection.

Lynch's influence on society's perception of the "American Dream," adds to the importance of his film. Irena Makarushka's article, "Subverting Eden: Ambiguity of Evil and the American Dream in Blue Velvet." Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation, enhanced the reshaping of our psychological perception of the American Dream, through her examination of life and society.

She utilized Blue Velvet to further her notions through varying ideas and contexts. Furthermore, she examined Lynch's film, because it encapsulated the concept that life is not as it always seems; the "American Dream" often serves as a façade, blinding society to the darker, perhaps more realistic, side of life.

When the film begins to shift into scenes of hungry black insects, the tone and ideas within viewers' minds begin to shift. The contrast between the insects and the happy children at play reveals a struggle between what Freud referred to as the Id and the Superego:

*" Professor Freud came to the very significant conclusion that the neurosis represents a conflict between the ego and the id (the instinctive needs); the psychosis between the ego and the outer world; and the narcissistic neurosis a struggle between the ego and super-ego. The differentiation of the mental apparatus into an id, ego, and super-ego thus resulted in a clearer understanding of the dynamic relations within the mind" (Alexander 176).*

This quote allows us to understand that the children at play are representative of the Id because of our instinctive needs, such as protection, which in this case was provided by the crossing guard; the black insects are representative of our Superego because they focus on " the part of a person's mind that acts as a self-critical conscience, reflecting social standards learned from parents and teachers," which correlates to the darker side of society.

Lynch's psychologically metaphorical tactic essentially forces viewers to understand that life is not as perfect as it may appear to be, and evil often occurs behind the closed doors of the " cookie cutter" house. His use of aesthetically pleasing scenery in the beginning, however, is important to remember:

It is only rarely that a psychoanalyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling. He works in other planes of mental life and has little to do with those subdued emotional activities which, inhibited in their aims and dependent upon a multitude of concurrent factors, usually furnish the material for the study of aesthetics.

But it does occasionally happen that he has to interest himself in some particular province of that subject, and then it usually proves to be a rather remote region of it and one that has been neglected in standard works.

(Freud 1)

Freud is essentially saying that aesthetics often impact the feelings one feels. This being said, Lynch needed to provoke a feeling of peace and happiness at the beginning of Blue Velvet in order to emphasize the shift of these emotions, into those of fear, terror, and confusion. This tactic allowed Lynch to augment the correlation between emotions towards perceived cultural images, and feelings when people recognize that life is not always as perfect as it seems in the "American Dream." This point will be examined at length throughout this paper.

Blue Velvet serves as a pivotal film because of the psychoanalytic components, particularly in terms of the characters. Each character is symbolic of varying psychological theories. Furthermore, the way Lynch introduces characters contains several Freudian theories. The first character viewers were introduced to was Jeffrey Beaumont. Beaumont came upon an ear while walking near his home. Psychologically speaking, the Freudian

theory has noted that when someone dreams about detached body parts, it is symbolizing male castration.

This is important to note when analyzing Blue Velvet. Before applying this theory to Blue Velvet, the concept of dreams is important to understand in terms of its applicability to the film. Dreams are heavily influenced by the image of our culture, and how we construct it. Lynch undertook this influence, applying it to Blue Velvet, by reconstructing our understanding of the American Dream through tropes of mystery revealed when viewers are introduced to the darker truth behind the beginning of the film's portrayal of the American Dream.

The dreamlike imagery he used, relating back to the uncanny, begins with the main character, Jeffrey's discovery of the severed ear. The uncanny focuses on the human mind and mind perception in correlation to creative works such as Blue Velvet. Just as Freud noted that detached body parts were subconscious thoughts of male castration, Jeffrey's finding was representative of the general unconscious of society.

When Beaumont brought the severed ear to the police department, the detective, Detective Williams, urged Jeff to let the incident go, because there were darker problems occurring in town. As expected, Jeff ignored Williams' comment, deciding to pursue the matter himself, receiving help from his girlfriend, Detective Williams' daughter.

Relating back to the detached ear, it largely foreshadowed the upcoming events. As noted above, a severed body part often resembles male

castration on the psychoanalytic level. When Jeff began to investigate the case, he soon found himself encountering a nightclub singer and her sadistic male abuser. This singer, Dorothy, and her abuser, Frank encapsulate the Freudian definition of sadism and masochism.

Due to the looming issue of male castration, one could assume that Frank was possibly interested in sexual dominance, power, and pain in order to compensate his own sexual insecurities. Freud heavily believed that sadism and masochism, which is a form of sexual pleasure derived from inflicting pain upon others or receiving sexual pleasure from receiving pain, was associated with innate male sexuality (Freud 1). Viewers watch as Frank belittles, insults, and beats Dorothy, but soon discover that she gains pleasure and arousal from the abuse.

Here, Lynch is exposing society to the darker side of sexuality, utilizing psychological theories, and forcing viewers to think about their own sexuality. Furthermore, he is allowing several people to act on their own fantasies as an outsider in a fantastical world. This greatly relates to the purpose of the Gothic genre, which is to expose and allow people to process and cope with difficult issues without actually having to endure the pain in reality.

When examining Dorothy and Frank on the psychoanalytic level, the Oedipal complex is also seen. Freud believed that the Oedipal complex was a child's internal desire to have sexual relations with their parent of the opposite sex (Klein 12). Applying this theory to the characters, Frank largely represents the child, while Dorothy represents the mother, in a dysfunctional mother-

son relationship. Interestingly, despite Frank's aggression, he referred to himself as a baby, illustrating his oedipal fantasy.

It is heavily illustrated, here that Lynch wanted to confront the less than comfortable theories and fantasies that many people truly have. Essentially, Lynch is supporting the notion of "forbidden emotions in powerful but carefully distinguished forms" (Johnson 522). By this, he means that often times repressed, and or, unconscious emotions that are ignored due to stigma, are expressed in other ways. Lynch was able to depict this through the characters throughout Blue Velvet and their sexual tendencies and personas.

Jeffrey represents the Oedipal complex even more. When Jeffrey's father was stung by a bee in his garden, he is brought to the hospital. During this time, Jeffrey stayed home, tending to domestic duties and obligations. His father's incapacity and helplessness forces Jeffrey to go to his father's home and hardware store.

Fittingly, it was around this time that Jeffrey found the ear. This discovery could be representative and symbolic of his own feelings of castration because of the domestic duties he began to take on. Generally speaking, the ear is representative of male's anxiety and shame towards their Oedipal fantasies. Lynch was able to depict this anxiety-provoking journey through Jeffrey's own investigation of the severed ear.

Jeffrey's anxiety and tension were, not surprisingly, further exasperated by Dorothy. His sexual attraction and longing for a desirable, yet perverse



female, relates back to the Oedipal complex. It is more important to focus on Dorothy, because of her perverse sexual nature, and how it impacts the men around her.

Moreover, the psychological reasoning behind these fetishes and tendencies forces readers and viewers to think about themselves, and possible pervasions, allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and society. It particularly addresses inner conflict and tensions. Some of these inner tensions can be seen in Dorothy through her fetishes. In terms of fetishism, Freud also heavily studied this psychological phenomenon. Fetishism relates to sexuality, especially in terms of children's sexual fantasies towards their parents.

The author's claim that we must question of our own perception of reality, as well as the issue of good versus evil, was precisely what Lynch forced his viewers to do throughout Blue Velvet. Makarushka tended to use the term "illusion" quite often, which was interesting, because Lynch's film had a strong illusionary tone to it, tracing back to the uncanny, and the dreamlike imagery and emotions throughout his film.

Her article was complementary to Blue Velvet because she was able to pose the mysterious and often unsettling aspect of reality versus illusionary life in the supernatural sense throughout the film. Furthermore, it did force readers to question how realistic the perfect, "cookie cutter," image of the American Dream is, ultimately redefining its meaning.

When thinking about the "American Dream," society has always seen it as the ultimate standard of successful, happy living. This very point was denounced by Lynch through Blue Velvet. Just as Makarushka brings into play the idea that this concept is too good to be true, "However, closer scrutiny reveals that things are not what they seem.

The slick, picture-perfect surface of the American Dream lacks substance and depth," Lynch applies this idea to Blue Velvet (Makarushka 33). The idea that things are not as always as they seem pushes readers of Makarushka's article, and viewers of Lynch's film, to think about their lives and purpose beyond materialistic, professional, and superficial levels.

This essential argument, encapsulating her entire article, reiterating that there is more than meets the eye, is emphasized through Lynch's character depictions throughout the movie. Jeffrey and his girlfriend seem to have the looks, charisma, and typical life that anyone would strive for, but as the movie progresses, characters such as Dorothy illustrate the darker side of life, involving heavy issues such as drugs, which subsequently make viewers think about life on a deeper level.

Difficult topics such as drugs and abuse are not often talked about, or even thought about, in families living the American Dream, which says a lot.

Psychologically speaking, the avoidance and ignorance of realizations and discourses about topics such as these can heavily influence people's psychological state. By forcing viewers to reflect on our own lives, past the jobs, kids, home, etcetera, Blue Velvet makes us begin to think about ourselves and identity on authentic levels.

This makes Lynch's work particularly influential on the psychoanalytic level, because by Makrushka arguing that we as individuals, must view life through multilateral lenses, as opposed to the unilateral lens we lean towards, in this case, the unilateral lens being the American Dream, people can begin to address their unconscious and subconscious mind, resulting in a fuller understanding of themselves and others.

Essentially, both Makarushka and Lynch show us that we must look past the American Dream, into the painful reality of life occurring outside of the protected bubble we place ourselves in. As a result, we become more aware and self-understanding, making us more organic and insightful individuals of society.

Another philosopher that attests to Lynch's psychological notions within Blue Velvet is Louis Althusser. His observations of ideology, throughout Ideological State Apparatuses, are particularly seen in terms of his repressive and ideological state. Lynch's depiction of the crossing guards, fireman, and detectives relates back to the repressive state because it is one in which cooperation from the public is achieved through physical coercion by means such as the police.

Blue Velvet illustrates what happens when these authoritative figures dissipate, " The loss of an authoritative interpretative frame of reference results in a cultural disequilibrium. For Lynch, this decenteredness is affirmed in the experience of the ambiguity of evil which ultimately subverts the unambiguous claim of the American Dream" (Makarushka 32).

Althusser's ideological state resembles more of a soft power that is sustained by cultural institutions such as church, family, and culture.

It also values a sense of choice of what reality is imposed. This state specifically correlates to the reshaping of the American Dream throughout Blue Velvet because it questions what life is like beyond the perfect image, and what reality really is. By seeing what happens when the repressive state fails, we can see how softer figures can reshape people's understanding of life, reality, and deeper meaning.

The American Dream must be redefined, and the psychological impact of the human mind must be addressed, according to Lynch. His film, Blue Velvet essentially allows us to understand that the true American Dream is one in which we are self-understanding, multilateral, and questioning of who we are beyond the image we portray, through its psychologically dynamic characters. Through his focus on Freudian theory, human understanding is better emphasized, increasing our own understanding of the self and others.